

# Late Middle Tennessee Rally Falls Short Against New Orleans

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## **MURFREESBORO, Tenn. -**

For the second straight game, Middle Tennessee dug itself an early hole and fought hard to come back only to suffer another demoralizing setback, 66-60, against New Orleans in front of a season-high 4,422 at Murphy Center Saturday night. Playing without leading scorer Mike Dean, who missed the game due to a lingering toe injury and is out indefinitely, Middle Tennessee trailed by as many as 16 but battled back to tie the game, 56-56, with 4:08 remaining; however, the Blue Raiders (12-7, 2-3) never could get over the hump against New Orleans (8-10, 3-2). Fats Cuyler led Middle

Tennessee with 17 points, tying career highs for points and 3-point field goals made (5-of-10), while Steve Thomas finished with 16 points and eight rebounds. Senior Michael Cuffee was held below double figures in back-to-back games for the first time in his career. He finished with nine points on 3-of-11 shooting to go with a game-high 10 rebounds. Sun Belt Preseason Player of the Year Bo McCalebb led New Orleans with 29 points and nine rebounds, while Chad Barnes added 12 points. Middle Tennessee struggled at the outset for the second straight game and trailed 29-13 with 7:51 remaining in the first half. The Privateers carried a 38-24 advantage into the locker room at the half after shooting 54 percent (7-of-13) from 3-point range. The Blue Raiders put up a strong fight, despite overwhelming foul trouble, in the second half and rallied to tie the game, 56-56, on a pair of Cuyler free throws with 4:08 remaining. Thomas made consecutive jumpers during the Middle Tennessee run, but after the team rallied to tie the game it never could gain the lead. Middle Tennessee returns to action when it plays at New Mexico State Thursday night. **POSTGAME**

## **NOTES:**

**THOMAS HAS BIG GAME:** Senior Steve Thomas enjoyed his best game as a Blue Raider in the setback to New Orleans. Thomas netted 16 points on career-best eight field goals to go along with eight boards and a blocked shot. Thomas, who has now scored in double figures in all four home games he has played, is averaging 12.8 points in the Murphy Center, 7.3 rebounds and is shooting a combined 60.0 percent from the field (21-35). **CUYLER GETTING OFFENSIVE:** Junior guard Fats

Cuyler helped pick up the slack for the loss of Mike Dean on Saturday night by matching his career-high with 17 points. Cuyler, who scored 11 of his 17 points in the second half, connected on five three-pointers to equal his personal-best set against Arkansas State a week ago. **TOUGH ON THE GLASS:** Senior Michael Cuffee was once again a bull in the rebounding department. The team's leader in rebounding entering play tonight, Cuffee tallied a game-high 10 caroms to run his conference average to 8.6 a contest. In his last four games, Cuffee is averaging 9.8 boards and has grabbed 10 or more three times. The Philadelphia, Pa., native now has five double figure rebounding games on the season and six for his career. **DEAN SITS OUT:** Senior Mike Dean did not play tonight and is out indefinitely due to a toe injury. It marks the second time this season Dean has missed a game due to an injury and the fourth of his Blue Raider career. "Mike's toe had been previously injured but it was getting better and then he re-injured it in the first half against Arkansas State," Kermit Davis said. "It affected his play against Arkansas-Little Rock (last Saturday) and then what he did against South Alabama (Thursday night) was downright courageous because no one realizes how much he was hurting. The reality of the situation is that he may be out one week, two weeks, or he may not play again this season." **SHOOTING WOES HURTING MT:** The Blue Raiders have lost three games in a row for the first time since a year ago and a common denominator has been poor shooting. In the losses to UALR, South Alabama, and New Orleans Middle Tennessee is shooting a combined 36.7 percent from the field (62-169). **PLAYER OF THE GAME:** Members of the working media voted Steve Thomas the Alexander Automotive Family Player of the Game. Thomas finished with 16 points, eight boards, and a blocked shot in 27 minutes of action. **INSIDE THE PAINT:** For the second straight game, Middle Tennessee did not lead the contest at anytime ... LT Lockett played a career-high 12 minutes off the bench ... Fats Cuyler recorded his fourth double-digit scoring game as a Blue Raider with 17 points tonight against UNO ... For the first time in his career, Michael Cuffee has been held below double figures in scoring in back-to-back games ... Over the past two games, Middle Tennessee has been outscored in the first half by a combined 26 points, while outscoring the opposition in the second half of those games by 17 points ... Keith Christmas saw his first action since Jan. 10 against UALR ... Kyle Young has 16 rebounds in his last two games. **POSTGAME QUOTES**

#### **MT Head Coach Kermit Davis**

"There are no moral victories to us. Mike Dean didn't play. Like I told our team, no coach or player feels sorry for Middle Tennessee. They probably hope he doesn't play again the rest of the year. That is the reality of it. We have to find a way to win these kinds of games. We got to, again, a horrible start. We got ourselves in a hole, and spent the entire second half, like Thursday night, trying to get the game even. But in both situations, we can't get the lead late in the game. I was proud of our guys. But, we just had some mental mistakes at the end of the game." **MT Guard Fats Cuyler**

"With our leading scorer out this game, we knew we had to come in and score to make up for the loss. **MT Forward Marcus Morrison**

"We didn't come out with very much energy or enthusiasm. [New Orleans] hit a lot of threes. We dug ourselves a hole early. We tried to fight back but fell short in the end. Basically, we have had two straight slow starts. We fought back last game to get it close, but we couldn't finish the deal. We fought back this game. We had some defensive stops, but we couldn't get over the hump. We had opportunities. We missed close shots and free throws, but that is no excuse. We should have won that game." **MT Center Steve Thomas**

"Like Marcus said, we have to come out with more energy. We can't be playing catch up every night. With our leading scorer out, we have to find the buckets somewhere. We just have to be better as a team. We have to find ways to win games." **UNO Head Coach Monte Towe**

"We were very fortunate to win this game. Anytime you go on the road and get a conference win, it is a great win. This certainly was a great win for our kids, obviously against a very good Middle Tennessee team. Bo McCalebb just plays at a high level. He has all year. [Chad] Barnes hit some big shots in the first half. Defensively, we guarded them pretty well. [Steve] Thomas was hard to deal with. We should have done a better job of shooting free throws. I am just real happy to get out of here with a win."

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